

An Online Life Like Any Other: Identity, self-determination and social networking among adults with intellectual disabilities

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Abstract

Research focusing on online identity and the personal experiences of adults with Intellectual disabilities (ID) is currently limited. Eleven adults with Intellectual disabilities were interviewed regarding personal experiences of being online and using social media. Data were analyzed qualitatively using thematic network analysis. Two global themes of 'Online Relatedness and Sharing' and 'Online Agency and Support' highlighted the positive potential of social media in enabling the development and maintenance of social bonds, valued social roles and feelings of enjoyment, competence, autonomy and self-worth. Participants reported sharing various expressed online identities, which did not focus on or hide impairment, challenging notions of

dependency, with participants both providing support and being supported online.

Introduction

There has been an attitudinal shift in society towards greater acceptance, tolerance, inclusion and human rights for people with Intellectual disabilities (ID)^{1,2}. Despite this, diagnosis of ID may result in life-long labeling, stigma, discrimination and restriction of human rights, leading to social exclusion and reduced life opportunities³. In parallel, expectations of ability have soared alongside the increased complexity of negotiating the modern world effectively (e.g. assumptions of digital literacy)².

With the proliferation of the Internet, individuals with ID may potentially reap numerous benefits. For example, the Internet can be a great leveller, because people may mask specific characteristics if they feel they may be excluded or discriminated against⁴ or experiment with self-presentations due to fewer constraints online⁵. However, hiding impairments may do little to enhance the lives of people ID⁶.

Additionally, the Internet offers opportunities for enhanced knowledge, supports, employment and social interaction and capital⁷⁻¹⁰. Social capital refers to processes of developing, strengthening and maintaining social ties and has been linked with enhanced feelings of being valued and wellbeing

amongst people with ID, who are at increased risk of having impoverished social and community integration¹¹.

Despite these opportunities, people with ID are not accessing the Internet to the same degree as other groups^{7,11-14}. Barriers precluding access include literacy/communication skills, cyber-etiquette understanding, lack of appropriate equipment, safeguarding, gatekeeping and inequity of treatment societally^{7,10,15-19}. People with ID are seldom consulted when technology is developed, and are often deemed unable to use Information Communication Technology (ICT)^{7,11}. Moreover, due to perceptions of inability and vulnerability, Internet use may be limited by those providing support^{10,20}.

Such hindering of self-determination may influence wellbeing in the offline lives of people with ID²¹. Self-determination theory posits that personal need for competence, autonomy and relatedness can, when satisfied, enhance self-motivation and wellbeing²². This theory has been linked with the need to understand circumstances where the social environment promotes or hinders individual development and wellbeing²³.

Despite barriers to access, people with ID are motivated to engage with the Internet^{17,24}. For example, those who use social media place value on sharing

their thoughts and feelings¹⁶. However, the underpinning drivers for this motivation remain vaguely considered²⁰.

Notwithstanding the relative dearth of literature, recent reviews^{7,11,12,24,25} of how ICT were being used beneficially by people with ID report a range of technologies used (e.g. the Internet, hand-held devices and social media). The main purposes and benefits regarding use included: maintenance of relationships with friends, family and romantic partners; developing a sense of belonging and connectedness; seeking and accessing information; education, vocational training and skill development; interests and leisure; and identity development, presentation and management. An increased sense of agency, independence, self-belief and self-esteem have also been reported as benefits of being online by younger people with ID⁹.

Despite the promise of the Internet for people with ID, empirical verification of social and development benefits is still accruing. Identity presentation and management have been presented as one of the main purposes for people with ID to go online^{10,26} however the meanings assigned to their online identity, self-presentation and motivations are not well elaborated^{20,26}.

Adults with ID are often excluded from the Internet and directly participating in research, with much research focusing on younger people. Accessing the

voices of people with ID may be an effective route into their world perspective and online social experiences²⁰ and should be prioritized. This study focuses on the accounts of adults with ID to discover how their experiences of being online and using social media relate to their sense of self, social relationships and identity.

Research Questions

1. What experiences do adults with ID have when accessing the Internet and social media?
2. How do adults with ID present and see themselves online?
3. How has being online affected the social capital and friendships of adults with ID?

Table 1: Participant background information

| No. | Pseudonym | Interview Method | Interview Duration (mins:secs) | Sex | Age (years) | Residence | Self Reported Diagnoses | Methods of accessing the Internet |
|-----|-----------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|--------|-------------|-------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1 | May | Facebook Instant Messenger | 80:44 | Female | 27 | Family home | Down Syndrome; Mild ID | Personal Laptop |
| 2 | Ulla | Facebook Instant Messenger | 51:38 | Female | 28 | Family home | Down Syndrome; Mild ID | Personal Laptop |
| 3 | Sameer | Face-to-face | 52:22 | Male | 43 | Independent Living Residence | Mild ID | Personal Laptop, Mobile Phone |
| 4 | Tina | Facebook Instant Messenger | 64:06 | Female | 36 | <24 hour Supported Living Residence | Mild ID | Personal Laptop |
| 5 | Scott | Face-to-face | 74:36 | Male | 32 | 24 Hour Supported Housing | ASD / Visual Impairment / Left hemiplegia | Personal Laptop, Mobile Phone |
| 6 | Don | Face-to-face | 39:12 | Male | 22 | Family home | ASD; Moderate ID | Personal Laptop, Computer |
| 7 | Ruth | Face-to-face | 54:41 | Female | 27 | <24 hour Supported Living Residence | ASD; Mild ID | Personal Computer, Mobile Phone |
| 8 | Shaun | Face-to-face | 96:38 | Male | 24 | Independent Living Residence | ASD; Mild ID | Personal Laptop, Tablet, Mobile Phone |
| 9 | Sabrina | Face-to-face | 44:58 | Female | 20 | Family home | Mild to Moderate ID | Personal Laptop, Mobile Phone |

| | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|------|--------------|-------|------|----|-------------|---------------------|--|
| 10 | Tony | Face-to-face | 68:22 | Male | 30 | Family home | Mild to Moderate ID | Library Computer, Mobile Phone |
| 11 | Sam | Face-to-face | 60:33 | Male | 25 | Family home | ASD; Mild ID | Tablet, Laptop, Play Station, Mobile Phone |

Note: All participants accessed the Internet and social media (Primarily Facebook) on a daily or more than weekly basis.

Method

Participants

A purposive opportunity sample of 11 people with ID who used the Internet and Facebook (Table 1) were recruited into the study from advocacy and social groups based in [removed for review].

Approach & Procedure

This qualitative study is underpinned by a post-positivist epistemology and positive and phenomenological psychology perspectives. It aimed to gather accounts of the online lived experiences of people with ID by focusing on explicating how they experience using the Internet and social media (specifically Facebook, though other social media, online activities and sites were included when discussed).

Participants were sent an easier-read consent form and information sheet with additional checks to ensure full informed consent. Participants were interviewed using synchronous (Facebook IM) and face-to-face interview methods based on preferences and needs (e.g. if they needed more time to compose answers).

Interviews began with questions about favorite online activities, followed by online supports, experiences and challenges (Box 1). The interview was loosely structured to enable participants to develop their own narratives.

Nevertheless, the interviewer provided more structure via questions for participants who found a lack of structure challenging²⁷. On conclusion, participants were debriefed, asked for future research suggestions and how they wanted to receive a summary of the findings.

Box 1: Topic guide used during the interviews[^]

1. Background questions about participants and how they access and use the Internet
2. Support to get online and to use Facebook or other social media
3. Activities and experiences on social media and other online activities people engage in
4. Challenges of using social media and being online
5. Online friendships and interactions
6. How participants and others present themselves online
7. Summing up, Debrief & Participant suggestions for future research

Notes: Prior to and/or following interviewing additional time was spent getting to know participants to support rapport building and to better understand their ICT use, interests and their social and support networks. Grand tour questions mapping onto the topic guide and additional prompts were used to facilitate discussion during the interviews. When conducting face-to-face interviews the first author endeavoured to remain sensitive to the receptive and expressive communication needs of participants using simplified concrete language and additional prompts where participants appeared to need additional support to understand topics. Also leaving space giving participants time to process the information and to formulate their answers. The first author was accessible throughout the duration of the study to answer questions.

[^](A full list of questions and prompts available from the first author upon request)

Data Analysis

Interviews lasted between 39:12 and 96:38 minutes (Mean=62:16mins; SD=17:13). They were transcribed verbatim imported into QSR Nvivo, and inductively analysed using semantic and latent thematic network analysis²⁸ to identify general patterns in the data, illustrated by ideographic accounts. This process involves: (i) familiarization and coding - where transcriptions were read and re-read and dissected into coded text segments on the basis of salient issues arising from the text; (ii) developing themes - once all the text was coded, themes were abstracted from the text segments by grouped them into related codes. The resulting themes were refined so they were broad enough to encapsulate the set of ideas contained within them whilst also being specific enough to be discrete; (iii) developing, describing, exploring and summarising the thematic networks – by arranging these thematic codes together basic themes were formed which were subsequently rearranged and grouped into organizing themes. Grouping of organizing themes allowed the authors to deduce global themes summarising what the organizing themes are about. To verify the networks they were presented with quotations in a table to ensure the networks reflect the data and the data support the themes and thematic structure; and (iv) finally, these networks were explored and used to answer the research questions²⁸.

Initial analysis was conducted by the first author. Thematic coding and subsequent networks were developed and refined in discussion with the second author. Member checks were conducted with participants and background information collated to better enable transferability of findings, enhancing the trustworthiness and credibility of the study²⁹.

Results & Discussion

Analysis resulted in two global themes, each comprising two organizing themes. These are outlined with illustrative supporting quotations in Table 2.

Table 2: Summarising the thematic network analysis from the qualitative data gathered around online social media and Internet use for people with intellectual disabilities with accompanying illustrative quotations

| Global & Organizing Themes | Basic Themes | Illustrative Quotations |
|---|--|--|
| Global Theme 1. Online Relatedness & Sharing | | |
| Organising Theme 1.1 Being Connected Online | Coming together with friends & family to chat and share. | <p>"I talk to Ron at the day center about his work and Steven about special Olympics" [P4, Tina, 36]</p> <p>"I generally chat to everyone and I see what's going on, on the err [Facebook] wall. If I see things that I like, I generally share them and comment on them and if I don't like something, I'll get rid of it... we just generally have a conversation and see how each other are, to see what we're up to." [P7, Ruth, 27]</p> <p>"Chat to the family and close friends ... Dad, my dad, my mum and my friends who I've known ages." [P10, Tony, 30]</p> <p>"Yeah because it's like, we have quite a lot of banter, so it quite good ... we just have a laugh and like take the mick out of each other." [P9, Sabrina, 20]</p> |
| | Actively maintain contact with friends and family | <p>"It's [Facebook] really great way to get in touch with people ... you learn more things ... it saves you the phone bill." [P3, Sameer, 43]</p> <p>"Well I do talk to my mum on it and my sister abroad (in Australia) on there which is free there. And you can also do like web-caming on there." [P9, Shaun, 24]</p> <p>"How good it [Facebook] was, how you could find like your old friends from school and that." [P10, Tony, 30]</p> |
| | Enjoyment and maintenance of romantic relationships | <p>"For me it's great because I can talk to people I know on here ... some of my sisters and cousins and friends, also my boyfriend" [P2, Ulla 28]</p> <p>"but sometimes I just want to spend most of my time with (boyfriend's name) ... cos I love him and he's my fella." [P7, Ruth, 27]</p> <p>"Skype more [than Facebook] now. Because erm, erm, I've got a boyfriend you see, so he's got Skype, so me and him like talk like every night." [P9, Sabrina, 20]</p> |
| | Overlap between offline and online friendships | <p>I: And are all the people on the football team Facebook friends?</p> <p>P3: Round about, well the football team, about, 20-25. [Sameer, 43]</p> <p>"Erm yes. Sometimes I don't talk to them always on Facebook. It's, we meet up as well outside of college. We like to the pictures or go out for a meal or, so we do stuff outside. We don't always sit at home and chat with each other. We do other things around it as well. I do both, online and offline." [P9, Sabrina, 20]</p> |
| | Taking an interest in others on social media | <p>"Well with my best friend, we talk about everything, like a good to plan to get together, to what she is doing, and what I am doing and just taking an interest in each of our lives ... I do like reading what people put up" [P1, May, 27]</p> <p>"[I like] finding out what friends are doing." [P6, Don, 22]</p> |
| | Frustrations around the behavior of others online | <p>"A ___ supporters sent me rude messages because they know I'm a Villa supporter" [P3, Sameer, 43]</p> <p>"It does get annoying sometimes because you try to chat to some and they don't always answer and I'm like, oh fine, I can't be bothered...I get fed of typing after a while and I think 'why do I bother?'" [P7, Ruth, 27]</p> <p>"Erm I only add like my college friends. I don't add anyone that I don't know." [P9, Sabrina, 20]</p> |
| | Sharing the story of your life | <p>"I like to share my life experiences, the stuff I enjoy" [P1, May, 27]</p> <p>I: What things do you like doing most on Facebook?</p> <p>P2: Well I am big into my stories and poems I put up and chatting with friends. I write stories and poems. [Ulla, 28]</p> |
| Organising Theme 1.2 Sharing your life & who | | |

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| you are online | | "I share youtube videos but I also, if somebodies annoyed me or something I have a good moan or a rant" [P7, Ruth, 27] |
| | Engaging in and sharing valued social roles | "I go to special Olympics, yes he's sending me messages." [P1, May, 27] "... set up the this thing called the [Online Forum name] ... and I'm one of the administrators one of the administrators for it." [P5, Scott, 32] "I'm a (...) Community Information Champion, I've not had anyone come in to ask for help yet so I've not had chance to use it." [P7, Ruth, 27] "I had Liverpool pictures [on profile] until my daughters was born. Changed ... If you look on there now, it's just my daughter on both pictures." [P9, Shaun, 24] |
| | Online self-presentation | "I think how I inspire is by standing up for what I believe in, and just being me ... I would like to think. that they think that my profile is interesting ... I think of myself as being true to who I am, and the way I think of myself" [P1, May, 27] "Sometimes you can just tell (the person on FB has a disability) by looking, you can tell that some people are cleverer than other people." [P3, Samir, 43] "[Would like to come across as] friendly and approachable" [P6, Don, 22] "Hopefully nice person and not err bossy or nasty or anything ... Yeah and not just that, I'm a nice friend, I'm kind. I'm obviously not a nasty person like some people are that use Facebook." [P7, Ruth, 27] |
| Global Theme 2. Online Agency & Support | | |
| 2.1 Competence & autonomy online | Efficacy & ability online | "Work it out for myself ... Just, just, just it's always been easy for me. I always figure it out." [P9, Shaun, 24] "I'm really good at computers." [P10, Tony, 30] "No because Facebook to me is erm ... if I have a problem I will try my hardest to deal with it myself." [P11, Sam, 25] "I do want to learn more technical things on the computer yes. So if I come across anything and need help to do it I know how to do it" [P7, Ruth, 27] |
| | Online independence & freedom | "No, all the photos that I put up, I had no help at all. I pick everything that goes up." [P1, May, 27] "It's amazing [being online] because you can do anything you like." [P2, Ulla, 28] "My games there I play a lot. But my actual chilling time I don't want nobody around me, just sitting with my Tablet with my headphones in." [P11, Sam, 25] |
| 2.2 Support, Development & Occupation Online | ICT as a route to valued occupational roles and skills | "Well, I like doing a lot it might be for educational purposes, to researching on stuff, like fundraising, to looking up finding places to do my training." [P1, May, 27] "Yes, I do computer tutoring. Any age down at the library. I do that between 2 and 3. So that would be keyboard, mouse, I do computer training." [P5, Scott, 32] I: ... you said earlier you posted pictures about your job because you were proud of that? P10: Yeah. Because it's a happy thing. ... I had to apply online. And then they ask you back for an interview. [Tony, 30] |
| | Being supported to use ICT and social media | "I had a bit off help from my sisters at home ... The picture after that I was on my own I was doing well" [P2, Ulla, 28] "...yes my partner [name] ...I found it ok and he helped me with my pictures" [P4, Tina, 36] "Erm we've got a technology bloke at college like. We go to him mainly. We've got an IT department, down at [Place name], and we go to them if we've got any problem or technology." [P9, Sabrina, 20] "...when I first started like sometimes my opinions, the way that I put them across, sometimes or what I've said ... Erm sometimes my mom had to warn me [P6, Don, 22] "He learned me how to do it. He told me what to do and then. Yeah over the years Facebook has changed a lot." [P9, Shaun, 24] "Er no I found it hard. I think my dad helped me. Yeah my dad and my brother at the time because being new to it and not knowing anything |

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| | | <i>completely about it and like that." [P11, Sam, 25]</i> |
| | Valued social support roles | <p><i>"I have friend and she is learning to use Facebook, I have helped with her to put up photos" [P2, Ulla, 28]</i></p> <p><i>"... some of the things you read on Facebook that your friends are writing you're like Mmmmm I don't like this so your like ... sometimes your friends put a rant or how they're feeling on Facebook and I'm like, I have to find out what's going on, so I private message them and ask them what's the matter and is everything ok? Then if they want to chat they do and if they don't, they don't. I do like to be helpful. I like to know that I'm helping my friends." [P7, Ruth, 27]</i></p> <p><i>I: Oh you put your aunty onto it?</i></p> <p><i>P10: Kind of helped her and everything.</i></p> <p><i>I: So did she not know how to use it?</i></p> <p><i>P10: No, so she asked me. [Tony, 30]</i></p> |

Global Theme 1: Online Relatedness & Sharing

The first global theme surrounded the opportunities afforded by the Internet of interacting with others. The ability to relate to others and gain a sense of social belonging underpinned numerous positive experiences recounted. Accounts also incorporated the relational nature of the online self, i.e. identity was defined by oneself *and* by interrelationships and interactions with others³⁰. This global theme also incorporated self-presentation online and desires regarding how participants wanted others to view them. This comprised two organizing themes discussed below.

Organising Theme 1.1: Being Connected Online

This organizing theme covered the online activity participants reported engaging in most frequently and enjoying, namely being connected with people via social networks which facilitated maintenance of existing social capital. This has also been observed in the typically developing population³¹ and younger people with ID^{9,18,24}. It encompassed six basic themes.

Participants reported ***coming together on social media with friends and family to chat and share***, the most enjoyable online activities people

reported engaging in. Four participants talked more extensively about fun, banter and playing practical jokes with friends and family as part of these interactions.

Social media also presented opportunities to ***actively maintain contact with friends and family***, which could be an issue when transport, finances or distance made meeting offline problematic. This also pertained to friends from earlier parts of life (e.g. school) that participants had reconnected with. Akin to prior research, there is supporting evidence that people with ID can accrue maintained, bridging and bonding social capital benefits online³¹. The emotional resources gained through relationships with others can lead to individuals feeling more fulfilled and valued by society³². This is encouraging given prior research suggested more limited social networks in this group^{33,34}.

Enjoyment and maintenance of romantic relationships was also reported.

Three participants currently in relationships discussed the ways in which these flourished via interaction on social media as well as offline. Three participants discussed past romantic relationships with two still interacting with these ex-partners via social media; one because the relationship had resulted in a child, another to ask their ex to leave them alone. One participant had developed a romantic relationship online but this had subsequently ended. Single participants did not express interest in using the Internet to develop new

romantic relationships. More research is needed regarding the online romantic relationships of people with ID¹¹.

The ***overlap between offline and online friendships*** was a feature of the accounts. Most online friends were known offline prior to becoming friends on social media or friends of these offline acquaintances¹⁸. Participants reported avoiding adding people as friends if they did not know them due to concerns regarding safety. Shared leisure activities (i.e. sports, games, college, hanging-out) were reported to prompt online interactions with friends.

Participants reported ***taking an interest in others on social media***, what they were spending their time doing, and of becoming aware of when friends were having difficult times which linked with providing support (cf. Organising theme 2.2). This interest was primarily but not always a positive aspect of people's online lives. ***Frustrations around the behavior of others online*** were also reported, specifically when people did not respond to messages promptly or at all and at the appropriate level of emotional disclosure. Underpinning these accounts was social comparison with others regarding online behavior (e.g. not over-disclosing or posting unpleasant things). Participants also expressed concerns about strangers and trusting people online.

Organising Theme 1.2: Sharing your life and who you are online

This organizing theme overlapped with 1.1 in its orientation towards social relationships, but related more to self-presentation, detailing the use of social media as a place to share aspects of life and self. It included three basic themes.

Participants discussed sharing pictures on social media and how through these they could ***share the story of their lives***. Participants described how they shared their interests, the things they spent time doing and enjoyed. Two participants talked about sharing their aspirations for their future lives and one shared poetry about her life on social media. This accords with the Internet allowing people to engage with possible selves due to lack of constraint and more freedom online^{5,35} (cf. Organizing theme 2.1).

When asked about their on- and off-line selves, participants talked primarily about ***engaging in valued social roles*** that informed their positive sense of identity. For some there was a sense of pride about sharing their community, advocacy and paid work roles, with one participant's profile picture representing him in work uniform. On- and off-line roles with a sense of responsibility and ownership were also discussed (e.g. being a sports team manager; a moderator for an online forum; a parent). Thus, accounts

illustrated the multiple positive identities, tied to roles on- and off-line, that the participants with ID experienced³⁶.

Participants also related information about ***online self-presentation***, how they thought of themselves and wanted to be viewed. These incorporated wanting to be authentically oneself both on-and off-line and that there was congruency between these two identities. One participant articulated a sense they had of themselves as a strong person, who was an inspiration for others with ID, and about the possibilities of life. Most participants expressed a wish to come across as a friendly, approachable and pleasant

In participant accounts there was no evidence of masking or hiding individual identity as a person with ID; instead people focused on their valued social roles and positive sense of their identity, which appeared more salient to them. One participant described how for some people others could tell that they had ID online, but also apparent in the accounts was how participant's viewed their online selves as both distinct but similar to everyone else's. There was a sense of being part of various known communities online and that these were part of people's 'normal' lives but also of needing more support. Thus the Internet can be a space where people with ID do not feel the need to mask who they are, as has been forwarded in prior research^{4,6}. Narratives

evidenced the potential for positive impression management and suggest that via online feedback people's positive identities were reinforced³⁶.

Global Theme 2: Online Agency & Support

For participants the Internet represented a place where their self-determination could be played out towards their individual goals, interests and personal development. People were able to demonstrate agency online, presenting themselves as competent and autonomous and, in some instances, had supported others online. Concurrently, participants acknowledged and talked about the support they needed to negotiate the Internet and social media. Two organizing themes joined under this global theme and are discussed below.

Organising theme 2.1: Competence & autonomy online

Participant interviews contained stories of agency online where competence, independence and freedom manifested in people's lived experiences.

Efficacy and ability online demonstrated via competence in using ICT and social media were key features of accounts. Five had been on ICT courses.

These and two others reported being viewed as having skills and expertise in

ICT. Other accounts contained participant self-representations of being able to engage successfully with the Internet⁹. Six participants recounted needing no help to access social media and learning for themselves how to use it. There were aspects of the Internet though that participants described not fully understanding or needing support to engage with successfully (*cf.* organizing theme 2.2 below).

Ten participants recounted instances where they were able to engage with the Internet autonomously, which promoted feelings of self-efficacy, self-worth and self-determination⁹. This related to autonomy in learning how to use ICT and ***independence and freedom*** over what was accessed. As reported previously⁹, a sense of agency was apparent in these accounts, with numerous instances where they had decided how, what and who to engage with online. Solitary leisure activities were also a feature of how they independently occupied themselves online, with three participants reporting organizing and enjoying activities like watching music videos and playing online games. Nevertheless, some accounts mentioned areas where there was monitoring and gatekeeping, imposed by family carers and support staff, similar to prior findings, primarily around staying safe and avoiding risks^{10,20}.

Organising theme 2.2: Support, development & occupation online

Online development and occupation linked with ICT and support were evident in accounts. In addition to being a place to share valued social roles (cf. Organising theme 1.2) knowledge of the Internet and ***ICT was a route to valued occupational roles and skills***. Two participants who reported having particular skills in ICT had part-time employment that involved using these skills to train others with and without disabilities, sourcing information or writing newsletters and reports.

Participants also reported ***being supported to use ICT and social media***, including accessing social media, keeping their information private, staying safe online and understanding netiquette, with some still requiring support in these areas. This support represented instances where participants were making use of existing social capital. Most reported having accessed support from family, friends, colleagues and advocacy group facilitators. Participants showed awareness of their impairments and what they needed support with but focused more on their strengths.

Support was not a unidirectional aspect of people's online lives. As noted some participants were viewed as very competent with ICT which afforded them routes to ***valued social support roles***. Hence, there was an intertwining of both needing support and offering support to others to use the Internet and technology. Four participants also mentioned instances where they had

supported friends emotionally when they were experiencing difficult times.

Thus, participants were providing social capital for others online.

Conclusions

This study supports the idea that social media can be a positive aspect of people's lives and can facilitate social capital development, relationship maintenance, identity expression and development and be a space where self-efficacy and self-worth are developed and expressed. Online social identity was intertwined with social relationships, experiences of valued social roles, and agency, competence and autonomy. The study highlights the importance of developmental and life goals in people's lives and the self-efficacy and worth people took from these social roles. Being in a relationship, having a job and being a valued citizen correspond to roles highlighted as important by people with ID in broader national studies³⁷.

Findings resonate with prior work regarding social media by people with and without ID. They accord with theories of social capital, identity expression and management, and with self-determination via competence, autonomy, relatedness and belonging being motivators for online behaviour^{22,30-32}.

People with ID offer social capital online as well as utilizing, developing and

maintaining it themselves. Online agency and multiple social identities were evident. These findings challenge notions of dependency and lack of agency in adults with ID online and corroborate the benefits of being online.

Online social interaction also allowed participants to define themselves 'like everyone else' and to create a sense of belonging to 'normal' communities^{17,18}. The importance of congruence in the online world was evident in accounts. At the same time as presenting multiple identities online, participants wanted to be viewed positively and for others to behave pro-socially. This adheres to notions of presenting both 'true selves' and 'possible selves', as highlighted in people without ID³⁸.

The small sample size was made up of cognitively able people with ID, with good levels of receptive and expressive communication. Research needs extending to explore experiences of others with ID who are not online and those most overlooked and excluded in relation to the Internet, for example less supported, poorer, older and more severely impaired individuals. Future work should also engage with how identity manifests when people with ID use different social media (e.g. twitter or skype etc.) as in this study participants primarily discussed using Facebook.

Based on accounts here, future work should focus on developing online technical and social competences, staying safe online and how cyber bullying, harassment and other negative online contact are managed and netiquette. As engagement of adults with ID with the Internet increases, further investigation of online identity, resilience, autonomy and self-determination are needed.

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